

THE COLD WAR PERSPECTIVE WITHOUT STALIN

Why Soviet Expansion May Now Accelerate

GEORGE LICHTHEIM

LONDON

STALIN'S disappearance from the scene he has so long dominated is the kind of event to which the term "end of an epoch" can be applied without overmuch exaggeration, and that for reasons which have nothing to do with his alleged status as Lenin's successor in the realm of Communist theory and practice. The real reason why this event must be treated with extreme seriousness is that it comes at a time when the Soviet regime is both able and apparently willing to extend its bid for world domination.

Unlike other dictators of recent years, Stalin died in his bed. The fact may not seem very significant to those who think of Stalinism as merely the Russian version of modern totalitarian tyranny, forgetting that it has achieved the kind of stability and permanence-in-revolution which eluded its ri-

ON MARCH 5, 1953 there passed away one of the cruelest of all tyrants: "genius" of world Communism, and chief designer and engineer of the most efficient terror system mankind has ever suffered under, Joseph Stalin was consigned to the immortality of the party embalmers, chemical and historical. But did his death weaken the system he had founded? Unlike Hitler and Mussolini, Stalin died in bed—as GEORGE LICHTHEIM here points out, and he marshals some of the various considerations that speak for a stability in Red totalitarianism that its Brown and Black counterparts were unable to achieve. Moreover, if we take fact rather than hope as our guide, this observer warns us, Stalin's death would seem to have removed few of the problems besetting the world since 1946; and indeed, in the hands of his successors, we may find the pressure of the Communist push against the rest of the world increasing. Mr. Lichtheim is a British writer who contributes often to COMMENTARY. His most recent article, "Will Soviet Anti-Semitism Teach the Lesson?" appeared in last month's issue.

vals. Hitler was a madman, and Mussolini a clown; that, too, is less important than the rapid crumbling of their respective systems of rule. Fascism has not stood the test of modern war. Stalinism has. The Third Reich was a bloody intermezzo in modern German history: horrible and destructive, but also grotesque and even (if one can permit oneself the thought) bordering on the farcical. It was never taken seriously by intelligent Germans, but intelligent Russians take the Soviet regime seriously. They have to; it has become part of the Russian heritage.

THE ease with which the succession was arranged, within a few hours of the dictator's death, is proof of a kind of bureaucratic stability, a stability which Hitler's crazy regime never attained. The balance between party, army, secret police, and economic bureaucracy has been preserved, with the party formally in complete control of everything, and actually a step ahead of the others. That is the meaning of Malenkov's elevation to the premiership, above Beria, Molotov, Bulganin, and the rest. Last October the reshuffle of the party directorate left Stalin and Malenkov as the only two leaders who were members both of the Secretariat and the inner ring of administrators—the effective "inner cabinet" within the Council of Ministers. Now the latter body has been streamlined and contracted, and Malenkov has officially taken Stalin's place as chairman. At the same time the party presidium has been sharply reduced in size; the technocrats whom Stalin introduced into the inner circle last autumn, as a counterweight to the party bosses, are once again, with one or two exceptions, relegated to purely administrative functions. Thus the party's grip is tightened in both di-

rections, and the effective controllers of the country's destiny are more narrowly defined. A sign of weakness? Perhaps, but for the time being a sign that the Stalinist system is in operation—without Stalin, and therefore with fewer possibilities of one group's being maneuvered against the other, but still in operation.

Ever since last October's 19th Congress of the Soviet Communist party it has become increasingly obvious that Stalin was, as it were, making his testament and arranging for the succession. Even his last "theoretical" pronouncement, the long article in *Bolshevik* published on the eve of the congress and misnamed "Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR," had the character of a testament addressed to the country's rulers: the party bureaucrats and the administrators of the state economy. For in the guise of a curiously scholastic discussion of Communist theory it contained an implied justification of the party's preeminent role in the Soviet planning system and Soviet life generally, and laid down the broad lines along which Soviet policy can be expected to proceed over the next few years.

IF STALIN is destined to go down in history as the man who transformed the Communist party into an instrument of state planning and state despotism, it is likely that his last formal pronouncement will rank high among the documents of the totalitarian age. For in it he has managed to define "socialism" in a manner which justifies the permanence of the despotic "revolution from above" that is the essence of the Soviet system; and he has done so at a moment when the Soviet Union is engaged upon an arms race which further distorts the industrial structure and emphasizes the preeminence of heavy industry at the expense of the consumer. Moreover, he has left behind a governmental structure in which the planners, the soldiers, the policemen, and the party leaders are carefully balanced—but with the party in the central position of control. This central control exercised by the party over all the rest is the essence of Stalinism, and

of the "permanent revolution" which has now been going on for thirty-five years.

Last October's congress was called together, partly in order to pass in general review the problems facing the regime at home and to explain to the six million members of the Communist party why there can be no immediate rise in living standards; partly to map out a long-term foreign policy, and indeed the entire perspective, for perhaps as much as a generation ahead. The "theoretical" basis had been laid with Stalin's article in *Bolshevik*, which stressed the dissolution of the world market as the result of the Second World War, and the likelihood of ever sharpening capitalist crises owing to the steady shrinkage of the non-Soviet world. From this, Stalin deduced the certainty of worsening relations between the "capitalist" states: as the general crisis of capitalism accelerates, the rival states try to obtain the largest possible slice of the diminishing cake, and in the process they inevitably collide. Hence the certainty that at some point Britain and France will try to break out of the Atlantic system—if only because American policy favors Germany and Japan at their expense. And hence also the inevitability of wars between the "imperialists."

The question is how far this kind of doctrinaire restatement of primitive Leninism is really taken seriously by the new party hierarchy. During the sittings of the congress it was remarked that though Malenkov and Beria dutifully repeated Stalin's prediction about the certainty of inter-imperialist rivalries and wars, they did so in a somewhat perfunctory manner, while most of the other speakers had hardly anything to say about it. It was left to Stalin to make a brief valedictory address to the assembled delegates of foreign Communist parties in which he exhorted them to rally their respective countries against the threat of American overlordship. This was the only attempt made at the congress to link internal and external policy. Stalin's wait-and-see attitude, for which his long theoretical exegesis provided the justification, did not of course amount to saying that the Soviet empire

was immune to foreign threats; but it did seem to imply that a long-term program of internal development was possible and realistic, and could be sufficiently flexible to allow for its extension to any country on the Soviet periphery where conditions might favor a Communist seizure of power. As for the possibility of foreign attack, he came close to brushing it off on the ground that war against the Soviet Union was too dangerous a game for foreign powers to risk:

It is said that the contradictions between capitalism and socialism are stronger than the contradictions between the capitalist countries. Theoretically, of course, that is true. It is not only true now, today; it was true before the Second World War. And it was more or less realized by the leaders of the capitalist countries. Yet the Second World War began not as a war with the USSR, but as a war between capitalist countries. Why? Firstly, because war with the USSR, as a socialist land, is more dangerous to capitalism than war between capitalist countries; for whereas war between capitalist countries puts in question only the supremacy of certain capitalist countries over others, war with the USSR must certainly put in question the existence of capitalism itself. Secondly, because the capitalists, although they clamor for propaganda purposes about the aggressiveness of the Soviet Union, do not themselves believe that it is aggressive, because they are aware of the Soviet Union's peaceful policy and know it will not itself attack capitalist countries.

This passage has been much quoted and generally treated as an exercise in semantics, or as a crude piece of psychological warfare. But Stalin was writing his article mainly for home consumption, and he clearly meant it to be regarded as his political testament. In the context in which the above words appear, they give the impression of being addressed to the party rather than to the outside world. Taken together with the confident prediction of capitalist crises "on a narrowing basis," owing to the shrinkage of the world market, and of inter-imperialist wars, *Stalin's testament amounts to a prescription for a long-term policy of continuing the cold war by all means, taking advantage of all local opportunities to seize power, but avoid-*

ing preventive wars. And if the capitalist world cannot unite against the Soviet empire, and is afraid to attack it, a preventive war on its part becomes less and less likely.

ON A purely rational calculation this is probably the safest policy for Stalin's successors to follow, though not necessarily for the crude and superficial "theoretical" reasons outlined in his article. It is, however, somewhat unlikely that they will in fact take his advice. The party congress provided no direct evidence either way, although, as already remarked, the other speakers treated Stalin's pronouncements on this subject with a ritualistic brevity which suggested a certain skepticism. It is more than likely that they thought him somewhat old-fashioned for attaching so much importance to the existence of inter-imperialist rivalries. In these matters one is reduced to guesswork, but the delicate balance between state and party can only be preserved by an individual dictator with unusual control over his environment, and with a certain conservative attachment to party dogma. As a theorist, Stalin has always been remarkable for his extreme conservatism and his reliance on past experience. In the above passage he explicitly based himself on the experience of the years leading up to the Second World War. It is at least not an unreasonable conjecture that this viewpoint is now regarded in the Kremlin as somewhat old-fashioned. This does not mean that the cautious wait-and-see policy is to be shelved, but *the likelihood of its being abandoned in some grave international crisis has probably increased somewhat.* The enlarged role allotted to the military among the top policy-planners—signified by Zhukov's return to the limelight and even by the decorative post bestowed upon the aged Voroshilov—should work in the same direction.

In these matters the personal factor cannot be disregarded, for in the end the decision will be made by a few men. Most of them have long been in commanding positions, but their relations towards each other are no longer quite the same. One thing is

already obvious: the Soviet Union is for the moment being governed by a committee rather than by a single dictator. In order to carry through his lightning reorganization of the government after Stalin's death, and to preserve his place at the very top, Malenkov had to compromise with some of the other aspirants to power. The merging of ministries and party offices, the appointment of Beria, Bulganin, Kaganovich, and Mikoyan to "overlordships" over entire groups of amalgamated ministries, the elevation of Voroshilov to the presidency instead of the colorless Shvernik, the promotion of Zhukov—the true representative of the officers' corps—to a post of political importance—all these are signs that relations within the hierarchy are fluid. Presumably one group has entrenched itself at the expense of others. Some observers have even spoken of a silent *coup d'état* which may have deliberately flouted Stalin's wishes, and perhaps Molotov's too. However that may be, there is now no single personality strong enough to control all the others; and these others include men like Beria and Bulganin whose departmental concern with the safety of the Soviet Union may easily outweigh their reliance on Stalin's prediction as to what is likely to happen ten years hence. Military planners are cautious and realistic by profession, and we have no reason to regard the first actions and statements of the new regime as proof that an adventurous policy is in the making; on the contrary, the emphasis for the moment is all on peace. That was to be expected, but it does not mean much. Uncertainty has grown, and with it fear. *The wait-and-see policy was Stalin's last gift to the party; it may turn out that someone like Stalin is required to carry it through.*

WHAT the new system clearly lacks at present is the quasi-national character which the last war conferred upon Stalin's personal dictatorship. It must for some time live upon the prestige the regime acquired by winning the war. But given time it may hope to obtain a more solid standing by achievements of its own. The probable

direction it will choose is not hard to guess, and in any case it emerged clearly from Malenkov's long and dreary address to last October's party congress: the Soviet public is to be presented with an "unparalleled" success in the carrying out of the current Five Year Plan, with a general streamlining and overhauling of the cumbersome administration, and with a modest rise in living standards. Before he rose to the top, Malenkov made his mark as an efficiency expert. Efficiency, too, is the party's weak point in the eyes of the planning bureaucracy, whose leaders were promoted last October and have now once more been excluded from the inner circle. The party is on trial in their eyes, and presumably Malenkov knows it. Its monopoly of information-*cum*-interpretation in everything that regards the outside world has yet to meet the critical test of a conflict with America; meantime it must show that it can administer Russia's bulging economy. To keep control, its leaders must beat the planners at their own game, while maintaining public confidence in the long deferred improvement of living standards. Stalin's great achievement was to get the industrial revolution under way, at the expense of the masses, while keeping the party under control and turning it into an effective instrument of his kind of "socialism." If the party is to stay in power it must go on running the permanent revolution he started: the revolution which consists in forcing Soviet society into the mold prescribed by the plan.

THE Soviet Union is now in the middle of its Fifth Five Year Plan, the second since the war. The Fourth Plan (1946-50) was apparently successful in restoring agricultural production to the 1940 level and raising the total national income slightly above that level. The object of the present plan is more ambitious: it is intended that by 1956 the national income shall be some 60 per cent above pre-war, industry alone rising by about 70 per cent and agriculture by 40-50 per cent. And since the massive expansion of the labor force achieved in 1946-

50 has now come to an end, the program depends on higher productivity from unchanged resources. If "Malenkovism" stands for anything in particular, it stands for this. One might say that it represents greater emphasis on intensification of the labor process, as distinct from the crude "extensive" methods applied under Stalin (as under early capitalism in the West). Not that forced labor is likely to disappear, but given time it may become slightly less important. Time, however, is just what the regime lacks. It is conducting an armament race, and any major letup is out of the question.

Efforts are nonetheless being made to raise productivity by 50 per cent during the current plan period, and though this aim is not likely to be achieved, some progress is being made: partly by new investment, partly by increased technical education, and partly by a general improvement in industrial organization. This process has been going on since the war, has recently been speeded up, and is best calculated to provide the new regime with the prestige it lacks at the moment. In personal terms one might say that *the new men must try to sell themselves to the masses as modern-minded, efficient, and fast-moving disciples of the aged tyrant they have succeeded*. In economic terms, crude exploitation of additional labor reserves is probably at an end anyhow, and the emphasis must lie on quality and better education.

The success of these methods must largely turn on the availability of additional sources of motive power. Oil production is supposed to go up by 85 per cent; the planned level is now 70 million tons in 1955. This is the first time that oil production is being expanded at a greater rate than coal; the coal supply is intended to be 43 per cent higher in 1955. At the same time generating capacity for electricity is to rise by 80 per cent. Output of heavy industry and building will continue to increase more rapidly than that of light industry or agriculture, and the combined share of investment and defense in the national budget will also continue to rise. These broad lines of economic policy were

laid down in 1950, received their "theoretical" justification in Stalin's pamphlet last October (which chided Communist ideologists for ignoring economic facts), and will certainly be continued under Malenkov. If successful, the plan should by 1956 have produced the following results, which may usefully be compared with the corresponding figures for Western Europe (i.e., the six EDC countries and Britain), for the year 1951:

	Soviet Union 1956 est.	Western Europe 1951
Coal and lignite output (million tons)	372	530
Electricity generation (billion kwh)	163	196
Oil consumption (million tons)	70	56
Crude steel (million tons)	44	51
Cement output (million tons)	23	41

Between now and 1956 there will be some further progress in Western Europe, but probably not much. Anyone is free to feel reassured by these figures, but Europeans remember that Hitler started his war, and almost won it, on much less than Malenkov has at his disposal even now. It is true that he did not have the United States to reckon with, or thought he did not. It is also true that he was a madman, and that Malenkov presumably is not. Given these two additional factors, the world can probably look forward to some years of "peace"—until the balance changes decisively in Russia's favor, or alternatively until the feeling gains ground in the Kremlin that time is no longer working for Russia and that it is now or never. In either event, the regime must try to justify itself in the eyes of the new Soviet hierarchy, including the marshals who won the last war. And it must do so in conformity with the Stalinist tradition. It is not a pleasant prospect.

IT is well, for this reason, to back away somewhat from the most recent events and look afresh at the cold war, as it presents itself in the light of basic Soviet doctrine, as well as official American doctrine. Of the latter, one can only say—speaking

from here—that it seems to have changed much less than Republican campaign oratory might have led one to expect. The emphasis is still very much on caution, so that there has been little advance beyond the policy of “containment”; and the inescapability of military stalemate in Asia appears to have dawned on the central figures in the new administration—or so it would seem. What dynamism there is, is confined to Europe: as, in the European view, it should be. For the first rule of European thinking (Professor Toynbee’s inflated reputation notwithstanding) is still that Europe remains the world’s center of gravity, as well as the only area where the cold war can genuinely be won or lost. The partition of Korea can endure; that of Germany cannot, because it involves the partition of Europe and therefore an irreconcilable clash of cultures in the heart of one of the world’s great industrial areas. This is not to say that German unification can shortly be brought about; it probably cannot.

In either case, however, the precarious equilibrium in the center of the Continent sets up tensions which may explode at any time. It is immaterial whether there was anything in the persistent rumor, before he died, that “Gottwald was getting ready to jump off the train”; it is even less material whether there is truth in the assertion that the entire Hungarian politbureau is to be “purged,” or that the other satellites may shortly attack Yugoslavia. The point is that such events are entirely possible, and that each affects one of the world’s neuralgic spots. The balance of power being what it is, an event such as the defection of the Prague regime from the Soviet bloc would be almost certain to set off the biggest detonation of all time; yet such an event is perfectly possible and could take place tomorrow if there should be an internal convulsion in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. Compare this with the vast quagmire of Asia, where war over vast areas, and the destruction of millions, could conceivably go on for years without seriously altering the world balance of forces and

without obliging either of the Big Two to make use of the “ultimate weapon.” If this analysis is correct, it follows that the internal dynamic of the Soviet regime is of vastly greater consequence for the world than any geopolitical contest in or around China. For it is this dynamic which will determine the behavior of the ruling group—now narrowed down to a mere handful of people—in any one of a dozen hypothetical emergencies affecting the unstable equilibrium of world forces at five or six critical points.

In this respect the present situation is much closer to that in Europe before 1914 than to the pre-1939 line-up, when there was a simple choice between stopping and not stopping Hitler in his tracks before he could start a general war. Today there is no such choice, and that is why the fashionable talk about “remembering the lessons of Munich” is so completely beside the point. There are no worthwhile lessons to be extracted from that experience, for the Soviet Union is much too vast to be placed in a straitjacket and rendered harmless by the Atlantic powers, as Germany, Italy, and Japan could perhaps have been rendered harmless if joint action had been taken in time. An uneasy equilibrium between two giant powers and their allies and satellites is a situation of a totally different sort, for then it depends on the internal dynamic of the two competing systems what the issue is to be. We know the nature of the American and Atlantic dynamic. What is the nature of the Soviet dynamic?

It is here that one is brought back to the seemingly far-fetched and abstract considerations entailed by a study of recent Soviet developments. These can be summed up by saying that they are but another phase of that peculiar “permanent revolution” of which Stalinism is the practical (and to some extent the theoretical) expression; a “permanent revolution” which, unlike the one dreamed of by Trotsky, proceeds from above, not from below, and whose object appears to be the continuous remaking of society and the prevention of any kind of sta-

bility. This revolution has now been going on over thirty-five years, and the momentum it has acquired, so far from slowing down, seems if anything to be accelerating. It is certainly spreading over a continually growing area, and there appear to be no internal brakes within the system which would allow it to settle down at some point and become conservative, in the sense that every post-revolutionary regime has hitherto become conservative once the original aim of the revolution had been achieved.

The illusion of an imminent stabilization of this kind is probably responsible for most of the blunders committed since 1917 by those who have had to deal with the phenomenon—from Communist leaders like Trotsky to conservative statesmen like Winston Churchill. In one way or another, they all assumed that the familiar historical process would repeat itself, and that saturation, social or territorial, as the case might be, would set in. Thus Trotsky steadily predicted a "Soviet Thermidor"—the emergence of a conservative and saturated ruling class which would liquidate the Communist dictatorship. Thus American and British statesmanship at Yalta tacitly assumed that the Kremlin would stop for at least a generation to "digest" its vast territorial gains; for, as Eden frequently reminded the Tory party with that engaging naivety which seems to be the hallmark of traditionalism, the Soviet government, unlike Hitler, had plenty of undeveloped territory at home, and therefore no need for "territorial aspirations"; which of course was true, only it happened not to be very relevant. In one way or another, they have all—anti-Stalinist Communists, socialists, liberals, and conservatives—been baffled and disappointed by the continuance of the "permanent revolution." Indeed, it has become so permanent that even within the inmost ruling circle of Stalinism hardly anyone is safe from it.

The mechanism of this unique phenomenon is still obscure in some respects, but it would appear that the state-party regime in the Soviet Union is at the core of the permanent revolution, which cannot be halted so

long as the party has not been got rid of. For the party—and this comes out very clearly from Stalin's last scholastic exercise—is self-centered and self-operating to a degree which makes complete nonsense of the belief that it is merely the instrument of the new managerial class. If it were, the revolution would already be at an end, for the managerial stratum shares with all other classes of Soviet society an almost desperate yearning for quiet and stability. The systematic distortion of the economy in the interest of capital investment in heavy industry, which is the core of the whole planning experiment, is certainly not due to managerial pressure, and neither is the drive to transform the collectivized peasants into inhabitants of "agro-towns." These measures, and the constant social upheaval and transformation rendered necessary by them, spring from the inmost dynamic of a self-centered autocracy which obeys no impulse save that of constantly remaking society, keeping it in flux, and preventing the emergence of stable classes with well-defined interests that could threaten the operation of the transforming mechanism.

This revolutionary autocracy, entrenched at the very heart of the all-powerful state machine, transforms society in its own image. Where the process encounters resistance, it resorts to "purges," and at the same time it expands into any vacuum which offers itself in Europe or Asia. At the moment, having more or less "digested," i.e. transformed, the East European satellites, it is engaged on the gigantic operation of penetrating into China. The process never stops for a moment. When it is not churning up the living body of society at home, it transfers its dynamic abroad. The motor which keeps it going, and which for want of another term must be called the Stalinist system, also sees to it that a proper balance is kept between the party and the army—twin pillars of an over-expanded capital industry which must stand or fall together.

WHAT is to happen to this *perpetuum mobile* now that its chief architect has

been removed from the scene, one can only surmise; but since its functioning had previously brought about an unprecedented concentration of power in the hands of a single individual, one may perhaps hazard the guess that the system will tend to become unstable, and even to disintegrate under the tremendous pressures stored up by its own operation. The task of holding the Communist party, the army, the secret police, and the economic bureaucracy in some kind of internal equilibrium seems beyond the power of the technicians who now have to operate the central mechanism. Something will have to give way, and though in principle the decision might fall in favor of relenting, of slowing down the inhuman tempo of investment and development, of allowing the tortured society some rest, it is in fact only too likely that relief will be sought in other ways. A measure of consolidation at home may well be accompanied by further expansion abroad. If the dynamic of the system cannot be broken, it can at least be shifted outward—away from the ruling bureaucracy, itself continually being

churned up by "purges" to render it more obedient to its Communist masters.

In this respect, as in others, Stalin's last words offer few grounds for comfort. Though he adopted a wait-and-see attitude towards the outside world, his disciples may well be less circumspect, and they clearly share his fundamental belief in the impossibility of genuine coexistence. The recent frenzy of ultra-nationalist disruption of the last remaining links with the outside world is not a very hopeful sign. To interpret it as isolationism is to forget that we are not dealing with a stagnant, or even a stable society, but with a dynamic system torn by internal contradictions infinitely more violent than those characteristic of our kind of world. When one thinks of the people who must operate the levers of command now that Stalin has departed, with all his ruthlessness but without his authority, one may recall the state of Germany after Bismarck—and try to estimate the gap between the puny forces of destruction then at the disposal of European nations and the vistas now opening before us.

MARCH 1953

BARBARA GUEST

THE world of my youth is ending.
Famous people are dying every day.
Gertrude Lawrence,
And now it is Stalin.
The last one will be Winston Churchill,
And after that probably,
My father-in-law.

There will be no one left,
Except those who remember
The old days,
And young people
Entering college
Who will read about it.

That's why I'm telephoning
You today, Alexander Nevsky,
To make an appointment with you
To ride out by the lake
Before they dredge it,
Or next winter's skies refuse
to fill it,
Or by some miracle
The mountain waters won't
feed it.
I thought we might ride
Out there today
And look at all those
Dead bodies again.

BARBARA GUEST is an art critic as well as a poet, and has published in various periodicals. This is her first appearance in COMMENTARY.